

TW: depiction of animal dissection and killing rabbits

When he first spoke to her, she was sitting on a stump, covered in mud, blood streaming from her legs. Her face was pale and placid. A child in shock, he thought.

He was going to have to take care of her. Clean the wounds and bandage them without hurting her, even though he felt weak and shaky and couldn't concentrate. Couldn't Wickerbottom do it?

He checked. She was still busy with the other one, the man. Wilson was going to have to help the little girl. So many people now! After being alone here for so long, and then with only Willow, seeing three people in the same spot felt strange.

He had to focus. This child was injured. He knew what to do and how to do it but he'd never actually done it. Not on a living patient. He had actually intended at one point to go into pediatrics, and then decided not to, because children were frightening little sticky demon things that threw rocks at hats and laughed at everything and he didn't want to deal with them.

The little girl was just sitting there waiting to be cared for. Poor thing. She must be frightened and in pain. She wasn't laughing or throwing rocks.

The hot water was ready. He dipped the cloth into it. It was hot, but not hot enough to burn his hands. That seemed about right. He was quite dizzy, and deeply regretting his choice to test out the blue meat. But how else would he have known it had no benefits? This was exactly the risk he'd decided to take, and unfortunately it hadn't paid off. That was all.

"This will hurt," he said. How did one professionally console a child in pain? "If you would like to hold my hand, you can do that."

She slowly blinked her calm, pale eyes. "It cannot hurt as much as my soul."

Wilson did not know how to answer that. "Treat my wounds however you'd like," she said. "I will decline to hold your hand, if you don't mind."

All right, then. That was for the best, he should really have both hands free for this anyway.

There were three deep gashes scored into each leg. This shouldn't happen to a little girl. He cleaned them, carefully. She did not cry. She didn't even seem interested, though she did flinch once or twice.

"I'm going to bandage you," he said. "It will sting."

"Do what you must," she said. She was so calm! It had been comforting at first, but now it seemed unnatural. Of course, everything was beginning to seem odd and threatening at the moment. This didn't feel like a normal headache...

He chided himself. A frightened child should be allowed to express herself however she wanted. Wilson's medical status was none of her concern.

He wrapped the honey-soaked papyrus around her legs. She looked into his face with the first signs of interest. "Your hands are so cold. Like death." Wilson had often heard that, even when he felt perfectly well. Perhaps he had some undiagnosed circulation problem. Well, if he did, he wasn't going to be able to get it diagnosed out here.

"I'm sorry about that," he said.

"Oh, don't apologize. It's quite refreshing."

"Oh. Thank you, then." As soon as he said that it no longer seemed like the right thing to say. Too late. He looked over her bandages. "I think that's it," he said to himself. He hoped it didn't show on his face- children should not have to doubt their doctors- but the blood had gone from his extremities to his internal organs, leaving his skin cold and sticky all over- probably because something awful was starting to happen in his abdominal cavity. Darn blue meat. "Do you need anything else?"

"I will not perish today," she said, looking away. "You've been effective."

There was nothing more he could do anyway, he didn't have the supplies for anything else. He certainly didn't have any pain medication for her. Or for himself, for that matter.

Wilson stood up and dusted himself off. There was a metallic taste in his mouth. Where was Willow?

He spotted her a little ways away. She'd made her own fire. A fire with just him and Willow! They could be alone together again. Wilson wouldn't have to make conversation or pretend to be more successful than he was. He could rest his throbbing head. And her fire looked big and warm, too- he had a chill. But Wendy! Should she be left alone?

She motioned him away, as if she'd read his thoughts. "I'll be fine."

"Ah. If you need anything, I'll be just over there."

"How shall I call you?"

"Just shout."

She was very patient. "I don't know your name."

Had he really forgotten to introduce himself? "Wilson. Higgsbury. Wilson P. Higgsbury. Percival- the P stands for that. Percival. I'm... call me... call me whichever one of those you'd like!"

"I see. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He bowed slightly, because someone sometime had told him to bow when he met young ladies, and then he stopped bowing about halfway though, because it felt weird, but maybe it would have been polite to finish... his head was swimming. "All mine," he mumbled. "The pleasure, I mean."

"All right, now I know how to call you," she said. "You can go. I believe I feel better than you do." That ended his first encounter with Wendy Carter.

The longer Wilson was trapped on the island, the easier it became to think of ways to cobble together things he wanted from the available materials. He was getting quite good at it, if he did say so himself. His newest invention was simple enough. Wooden splinters served as simple pins to hold open the flayed skin of his current specimen. The rabbit's internal structures were on full display for him to sketch from.

Charcoal had never been his preferred tool, too messy and smudgy, but there wasn't a lot of choice here. He just had to be careful and concentrate. He soon lost himself in the drawing enough to forget the itch of his bug-bitten skin. Certainly enough not to notice he was watched.

Perhaps he wouldn't have noticed anyway- here, he often felt he was being watched even when no one was in sight. (He wouldn't find out why that was until it was far too late.) But then, as he was using a thin stick to nudge aside a flap of membrane that was obstructing his view of the liver, he looked up. Two identical pairs of eyes watched him from a few feet away. He jumped and dropped his stick into the rabbit's abdominal cavity.

"Wendy!" He swallowed. "Abigail!"

"Did we startle you?" Wendy asked.

"No," he said. "Not at all." And he wondered why he was lying to her. Er, to them, rather. "I was just doing a bit of research. This is all completely scientific."

"You dropped this." She reached into the rabbit and retrieved his stick.

He blinked. "Oh. Thank you!" He took the scrap of wood from her hands. It was sticky with fluids.

She peered into the rabbit. "Are you doing a sketch?"

"Yes..."

Wendy appeared completely unfazed. "It's in very good condition," she said.

"I trapped it and snapped its neck." Wilson found himself flinching slightly to hear himself speak of such frank violence.

Wendy showed no such reaction. "What's this here?" she asked, pointing into the rabbit.

"Ah! That is the gallbladder." He reached in and picked it up, having already cut it loose to arrange it in a slightly better position for the illustration. He squeezed it in the palm of his hand and explored its lukewarm surface with his fingertips- a habit of his in dissection.

Wendy still was not showing the slightest hint of discomfort. Remarkable. Even Wilson had not been this calm when confronted with his first dead animal. Wendy must be keenly interested in science! "Would you like to hold the gallbladder?" he said. Abigail made a soft sound. Wilson nearly dropped the gallbladder.

"No thank you, I don't think I need to touch it," Wendy said. She pointed into the cavity again. "Abigail is wondering about this structure."

Wilson peered at the structure in question. His nose wrinkled. "That... requires further study..." He had no idea what it was. He'd never seen anything like that inside a rabbit before. It was spongy, and all of them had it here.

"I had a question for you," Wendy said. "You seem to know some anatomy."

"Yes! What would you like to know?" What a nice little girl.

"I've been having trouble making a clean kill," she said. "You snapped this rabbit's neck? I find that difficult. I usually use an axe... like this." She mimed chopping at the rabbit's throat. "But it takes several hits."

"Oh," Wilson said. That was not a question he'd expected. "Perhaps someone else can kill your food for you..."

"It is unwise to not have the skill myself," she said.

"I see." He tilted the rabbit's head to the left. "You've been attacking the trachea. Try here. You'll cut the jugular vein... there will be a lot of bleeding, however..."

"I see. Thank you." She bobbed her head, and Abigail floated in a way that somehow suggested she was giggling. "I'll leave you to your work now."

As Wilson watched her leave he found his fingertips finding his throat, hesitating on the cartilage around his windpipe, easily palpable through the skin. The image of the rabbit struggling to breathe through a shattered trachea had found him and was hard to shake.

What a calm little girl.

There was nothing for him to do but lie there and wait for Willow to come back. His arm was splinted, but that was barely any help. It was almost a joke, that little length of wood attempting to do anything about this injury.

It didn't do anything about the pain. Nothing did anything about the pain. And there was no reason for it. It was silly, Willow's clinging to him like this. He hadn't thought she was squeamish at all, but here it was- she couldn't bear to let him die for whatever reason. So here he was. Just lying here, useless. It was almost as bad as that rotten sanatorium. He had thought that out here, no matter what other awful things happened, long boring days in a sickbed were far behind him, but here he was. And not even a book to read.

Then he opened his eyes, and she was there. Not Willow. Wendy. Observing him solemnly. "There is little hope for you this way," she said. "I see you are wearing your amulet..."

Wilson nodded. He'd been trying to tell Willow that for days. The amulet's power was fading, too. He could feel it. It wouldn't last much longer. And once it ran out...

Wendy held up an axe. "Perhaps I might... hasten things?"

He stared at the axe blade. "Finally!"

"All right." She drew back the blade- but. She was a little girl. There were certain things little girls shouldn't be subjected to. And cold-blooded murder was probably one of those things. Even if he had the amulet- this didn't seem right.

"Wait!"

"Mm?"

"No... this..." He was weak and his breathing was shallow. It was hard to talk. He'd lost too much blood, that was the problem. And he hadn't had enough food. In this useless state, and with women and children who needed it, he was reluctant to ask for more... "Just wait..."

She adjusted her grip on the axe. "Are you certain you want to live this way?"

"I don't want to." That was not the problem.

"Then allow me." She placed soft, gentle fingertips on the side of his neck. He closed his eyes, swallowing. Then, an edge of cold against his skin, and... the life quite literally ran out of him in a warm tide. It was so swift. So easy. Just as he'd thought it would be, if people just stopped for one second stringing him along in that helpless, useless state. Finally...

When the light cleared, he was standing. He could stand again.

The ground was splattered with blood. Wendy was lying on her side, peacefully sleeping, a victim to the amulet's radiating power. Her forearms were red with the spilled juice of his most recently terminated life. She'd hit the carotid artery with her first cut.

There would have been even more blood if there had been more left in his body, he'd venture to say. She must have practiced that.

Abigail had arrived somehow when he hadn't been looking. She watched him with blandly curious eyes- he accepted her now- just one more thing to not understand. Someday, when he had more equipment.

Wilson nodded to her. He crouched down and began to clean his blood off of Wendy's arms, as gently as possible so as not to wake her. This seemed... wrong. He should have stopped her...

"Wilson?" Willow was standing there, two rabbits in her hand, held by the horns. They weren't struggling. Dead. Her eyes were staring. "What happened?" she said.

"Ah! Well-" What could he say? 'I tried to stop her?' She was a little girl. He couldn't just say that she'd decided of her own accord to murder him- a grown adult- and he unable to stop her.

What if she had nightmares? There was so much blood, and humans were instinctively disturbed by blood...

Willow was still staring at him. "Wilson, what happened?" She was so pale.

"It was-" he started, but she cut him off.

"Be a minute," Willow said, setting the rabbits down on the ground. She turned and walked away, and squatted on the ground, and lit a fire in the grass. He'd never seen her do that before.

"Whee!"

He stepped closer. "Just a minute!" she said. She trailed her fingers back and forth through the flames.

He stepped back. He had to let Willow know that this situation didn't warrant such an upset. He opened his mouth to explain, but no sound would come out.

The fire went out. Willow stood up, brushing her bangs back. Wilson tried to speak, and still could not, so he put his arms around her. She stiffened at first, but before he registered that and started deliberating whether to let her go, she had turned and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. She was trembling.

Wilson couldn't remember the last time he'd given someone a hug. He hoped he wasn't doing it wrong. Was this inappropriate? Probably.

"Just tell me what happened," she said. Her voice was whispery and squeaky. He hated hearing her sound that way. He was sort of at a loss. "Tell me what happened!" she said, louder. Now she was getting angry-

"Nothing happened that was not inevitable." That was Wendy's voice, muzzy with sleep. "His arm began to bleed again... his life went with it."

Willow seemed to accept this. She was quiet, trembling in his arms. He ran his hand over her hair. Her ponytails were matted. She had no hairbrush. Maybe he could make her one.

Wendy had lied. Why had she lied? Had she lied? The events of a few minutes ago didn't seem plausible now. And he'd been in a horrible state. He'd probably been hallucinating it. Maybe his wounds had gotten infected at the last... but why would he spontaneously bleed out with no warning? There was a lot of blood on the ground, and his condition had been stable.

"Sheesh, I'm sorry," Willow said, bringing him back to the present. "That bad dog! I should have gotten there sooner." She was trying to sound casual, but her voice trembled. Apologizing! She was apologizing! No, no no! He'd never considered that she might blame herself like this.

"That wasn't your fault!" he managed to say. She said nothing for a moment. Poor Willow! Was that why she'd been so upset by the whole thing? She shouldn't feel guilty... it was... he hadn't told her how he'd gotten over by the hound nests in the first place. How he'd been thinking about wolves. And how they had evolved into dogs, at some point. Domesticated. Because of some enterprising, plucky human. And. Wilson considered himself fairly enterprising. And plucky. And he'd had some blue meat on hand. The hounds liked blue meat. It hadn't been Willow's fault at all.

He was still holding her. He should let go of her. He let go. He hoped no one noticed he was blushing. Funny reaction, that. Involuntary. Nothing to be ashamed of. Right.

Wendy looked calm. Sleepy. Her sister floated by her shoulder, restless.

"When did Abigail come back?" Willow asked. She sounded cautious. A memory was tugging at him. Wendy killing a butterfly and a glowing shape erupting from the ground next to her.

There was a mark on the side of his neck. Not a mark he could feel with his fingertips and probably not a mark that could be seen, but a mark just the same.

The lean-to had been made for sleeping out of the sun, but it was proving effective at avoiding rain, too. He and Willow were sitting with their backs together, creating a sort of warm, dry, mutual chair.

Wilson had recently discovered that berry juice and redbird feathers could make for serviceable ink and pens. It was easier to control, easier to write with and easier to sketch in details with than lumps of charcoal. Other benefits too, he discovered as he licked a tart, sweet, sticky ink smudge off of his thumb.

"Hmph," Willow said.

"What's that?"

"Wendy, you're going to get wet!" Wilson leaned over and craned his neck to see Wendy lying out there in the rain, on her back, on the ground. "Come in here! There's room," Willow said. "Get out of that nasty old muck."

"I prefer not to," Wendy sighed.

"Why not?"

"It's better this way."

Willow 'hmmphed' again.

Wilson pressed his back gently against hers, to remind her that if she wanted company in here she already had it. "Wendy is quite unflappable," he said.

"She's out there getting wet," she complained.

"She'll come in if she wants to."

"It's gross out there. She'll catch a cold. Wendy, come on in here with us. It's nice and warm in here. Not like fire, but warm."

"Warmth is not for everyone," Wendy said.

"That's stupid."

Wilson interjected here, fearing an argument. "I'm sure she has enough sense to come in out of the cold!"

"Then why won't she?"

""She prefers to be out there. It's not that cold. There's no use arguing with her anyway." He studied his sketch. He didn't really need to keep drawing birds. He had plenty of illustrations of birds. It was soothing to draw birds...

"Maybe the water will fill the hole in my heart," Wendy sighed.

Wilson's backrest hopped to her feet with a 'harrumph' and he nearly fell backwards. "Hey!" It was not cold in the lean-to, but his internal temperature adjustments had been relying on the contact with Willow's body heat and were going to need to recalibrate a bit.

Willow stomped back into the lean-to, dragging a disgruntled-but not struggling- Wendy by the ankle. She dropped her on the ground in the shelter and sat back down. "There," she said. "I fixed it."

"Hmph," Wilson said. Wendy was going to make everything damp.

"And shame on you, leaving a little girl out in the rain." Willow picked up the pieces of flint she'd been sharpening and got back to work.

Wendy rolled baleful eyes over to him. She wasn't a normal little girl. Couldn't Willow see that? Not that her company in here wasn't welcome, but she hardly needed to be babysat.

She was shivering. He touched her hand. It was like ice. "Wendy! You're frozen! Why didn't you come in?"

"I told you so, you blockhead," Willow grumbled. She was no longer in physical contact with him.

She could catch cold! Wilson dug a warm thermal stone out of the nearest chest and nudged it against Wendy's side. "Willow, would you make a nice big fire?"

"Now you're all worried?"

"I didn't realize... why on earth didn't you come into the shelter?" he sputtered.

Willow was getting up. She never did turn down a request for a nice big fire.

Wendy stared up at the ceiling. "What is the point," she said-not asked. Did she want to freeze to death?

Wickerbottom turned the page. "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me, complexions that lik'd me, and breaths that I defied not; and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell." She closed the book.

Wilson blinked and looked around. Wickerbottom's voice was rather kind and soothing and grandmotherly and he had never really liked Shakespeare much. He hadn't been asleep, or anything. Nope.

Wendy and Webber hadn't lost interest. They were sitting on the ground, looking solemn. Hadn't Wickerbottom said this was a comedy? Maybe they were struggling to make sense of it. Although they tended to always be rather solemn.

"I do hope you enjoyed it," Wickerbottom said.

"I prefer his tragedies, but it was an effective reading," Wendy said.

Webber sniffled and scuffled in the dirt. Wilson was instantly awake for real. Wickerbottom leaned forward attentively. "What seems to be the trouble, young man?"

"Nothing," he said, "only- mum and dad used to read to me, is all." He sounded apologetic. "We miss them sometimes."

"Oh dear," Wickerbottom said. She put the book carefully to one side and patted her knees. "Come here."

With some hesitation, Webber went to her. She folded him onto her lap and stroked the fur on his head with a manner both businesslike and gentle. She did not tell him he would see his parents again.

Wilson tried and failed to swallow the lump in his throat. He dropped his eyes to the ground. Maybe he could make Webber some toys, or something...

He noticed Wendy out of the corner of his eye. Wendy! She must miss her parents too. She never said anything. She never asked anything of anyone, unless it was some trifle like a snack or an extra piece of straw. And he hadn't exactly tried to make friends. She was-

(scary)

-er, shy. And perhaps she was afraid to reach out. He, the adult, should let her know that he was available for help whenever she needed it.

He held his arms out to her. She stared at him, and then a rueful look came onto her face. "I am beyond comforting, Mr. Higgsbury, but thank you." Her tone was polite, but it was quite clear that his attentions were not needed. He dropped his arms. Right. Of course.

"If it is any help," Wendy said, turning to Webber, "at least your parents cannot see what's become of you." A silence fell. Wendy continued: "I doubt your current state would make them happy."

Webber stared off into space. Wickerbottom frowned. Wilson felt like he should do something but he didn't know what.

"It's difficult," she said. "Seeing someone change, and being unable... I've just upset you. Never mind." She stood up and started to walk away. Wickerbottom was busy with the other child, so Wilson followed her, catching up with her shortly, in the shadows of the woods.

She turned to him. "Yes, Mr. Higgsbury." He had had vague ideas of either reprimanding or consoling her. Now that he was faced with her cold, solemn face, he instinctively held his arms out again.

"I don't want a hug," she said.

"I do! You look so sad!"

"I don't follow."

"What do you want?"

"I want one thing only and you can't give it to me. Please, just give me some space," she said, turning away.

He followed

."This isn't much space," she said.

"I can't leave you out here alone out here!" He'd give her space when they got back to camp

."I spend a lot of time alone out here."

He might have to talk to the others about that. "That's not good. You're just a child. You could be killed..."

"I know."

Maybe she was afraid of him. The last time they'd been alone together, she'd watched him die. He wished Willow were around, she seemed to know what to say in these situations. She always knew when he needed cheering up, at least, even though she spent most of her time making fun of him if he didn't happen to need cheering up.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" he said.

She whirled around to face him. "I want my sister. She's gone. And none of your playthings can bring her back."

"I'm sorry."

She folded her arms over her chest, staring into space. "There's nothing to be done." Maybe she was right.

Wilson scuffed at the ground. There had to be something to say that would help her, but he didn't know what it could be. And so in the end, he stood there and let her walk away.

She stands before him, infernal rod gripped tightly in her hand. He chafes and tugs. Wrists move one inch or so, hit pain and stop. All right. That's fine. He doesn't need to move anymore.

"Get out!" he says. He can turn his voice into a bellow out there, but in here it sounds shrill and brassy. "You've come too far. You're starting to make me mad!"

She looks him over. Her eyes drift to the side and down. His hand, probably. "Not what I expected."

"Aha! So you were curious... not everyone is cut out to know these things. Leave research to the researchers!" He tugs on his restraints, not because he wants to anymore but because this ridiculous carbon/hydrogen/oxygen shell he is anchored to is still running subroutines of fear, adrenaline, the screaming animal need for continued existence. It insists that he is injured and thirsty and captive, when pain and thirst mean nothing anymore. A sheer nuisance. Almost as annoying as that incessant ragtime number.

Her eyes continue to drift over him. "I did not expect to find you... alive."

"Are you satisfied now? I'm doing important work here. I mustn't be interrupted. Go play."

She stares at his legs.

"My face is up here!" he barks. "You've seen blood before."

"Did Maxwell tell the truth, then?"

"Maxwell?" he spits. "Forget about that has-been and his bunnies out of hats. I'm in charge now. Don't worry! I'm a genius! But you have to leave me to my work! I've already lost so much precious time-"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but this is a horrible distraction," she says, and she turns off the music. Oh, heaven, silence.

"I've been listening to that horrible thing for so long," he says. She looks into his eyes and he sees something in her look that he never noticed before. But it was there...

(Yes, it was there when you offered her help to ease your conscience. She has always seen you for what you are.)

And what he... still is. After all of that? "Enough of this. If you won't leave, I'll have to get rid of you!" He tries to send her back and out of here and he can't. He can't get rid of her. What... what was it...

(Even a King is bound to the board.)

She is sweeping her right foot behind her left and bending her knees, lowering herself to the ground with her skirt spread out to the sides, her head bowed. That's a curtsy. Wilson P. Higgsbury has never in his life been curtsied to. He is at a loss for words.

"Your Majesty," she says. "Forgive me for my confusion."

"Oh no," he says, unable to stop the sputtering now, "I'm just-I'm a scientist. I'm from Massachusetts."

"Shall I call you Doctor, then?"

"I'm not a d-doctor." He tries to swallow. His throat is so dry.
"Please. Just leave."

"Maybe you've forgotten... there's no way out from here."

"Of course there is! You've wanted to kill yourself for a long time, haven't you? Well-"

"Yes," she says, and there is an edge in her voice, "I have been tempted by death, and I've resisted. It has never been recommended to me before."

"Sometimes it's the right way out."

She is quiet for a moment, long enough for his mind to drift. It's spring, out there. It's raining. He's been watching the rain, why it rains, what it does. He thinks he's ready to make a small shift... just a little one... just nudge the rain, and see if...

"Sir-"

Wendy's still here. Right. "I have so much to do," he says. "You have to leave."

She's holding the rod over the base.

"No! Stupid girl! Get out!"

"That's rude," she says mildly.

"A pox on you!"

"Don't you know any stronger language?"

"Stronger language? You are nine years old!" She's had a birthday. She probably didn't notice.

"I see."

"Now put that down. I can talk to your parents, you know," he says. "I'll bring them here and they'll tan your hide."

"My parents wouldn't last long here," she says.

"Then I'll bring them back! Didn't know I could do that, did you? Huh?" He wants to grin, but can't somehow. Whatever. "No one ever leaves here, Wendy. That's why I'm going to make it so much better for all of you! Oh, you'll see." His voice breaks. His body is such a nuisance. "You can't see it yet... I hear you, you know! Maxwell is saying nasty things about me. He thinks I'm sitting here twiddling my thumbs but he has another thing coming."

"I believe you. You must be getting awfully tired," she says.

"Hmph! Tired? Science does not tire and neither will I."

"Your dedication is rare indeed. I assume you are also working through pain?"

"Pain is nothing besides progress," he says, appreciating his alliteration.

"A short respite will not lessen your dedication."

"How am I supposed to take a break when there's so much work to be done?"

"None of your work will be undone," she says.

He peers at her. She wants to take his place, that's what this is. "Put that rod away! You don't want to be here. It's no fun. And you can't help your sister. I tried. I thought of everything. I belong here."

"Don't the whispers seem rather cold? Aren't you hearing less than you would like?"

"But- but- no! Put that away!" He strains and tugs and cannot move and no one will remove this girl.

She sighs heavily. "Your turn has ended."

"No, no, no, no..."

She's done it; he is free, and he falls to the ground without the restraints holding him in place. His mind is going gray and dark already. There's nothing else to be done.

Oh, Wendy, Wendy...